

It is wildfire season again in Florida. At St. Marks National Wildlife Refuge, we have been prepared for initial response on wildfires on the refuge and wildfires threatening the refuge since the beginning of April. Also, since St. Marks NWR is the center for District 4 Fire Management for Region 4, we have been assisting and supplementing St. Vincent and Lower Suwannee National Wildlife Refuges with fire fighters for their wildfire concerns.

Due to lack of rain this winter, the refuges are running an average of 13 inches below the normal water levels. Therefore, the Keetch-Byram Drought Index (KBDI) is averaging around 600 and continues to climb. The higher the KBDI, the more likely a fire will start from a lightning strike or a debris burn and the harder it will be to contain the fire to a small area. Due to the potential for fire, the State of Florida has issued a burn ban for the entire State. The burn ban includes prescribed fire and burning of trash.

Besides being very dry, the next concern will be the start of the thunder storm season. Of course, thunder storms bring the needed relief of rain but they also, bring the ignition of fire through lightning. On Wednesday, May 23, 2007 a thunder storm passed over St. Marks Refuge with little rain but a lot of lightning. Eight wildfires were ignited due to the storm. The St. Marks Fire Crew quickly responded to the fires. They sized-up the fires based on their location and the known fuel loads.

The fire crew then responded to the fires that posed the most threat. St. Marks Fire Crew also received assistance from Apalachicola National Forest Fire Management, through the use of a helitanker, spotter plane, D-6 bulldozer and an Idaho City hot shot crew that were located in Tallahassee .

Two fires were in the Wilderness Area: the **Yellow Fly** - which grew to 30 acres before it merged with: the **Wax Myrtle** - which grew to 405 acres before merging with Yellow Fly. Although water could be dropped by the helitanker above, only hand tools can be used in the Wilderness Area, which hampered suppression efforts.

Two wildfires broke out north of Stoney Bayou Pool #2 - each .1acre apiece, which were easily contained the first day due to low fuels from a December 2006 prescribed burn.

**Grassy Fire** was southwest of Visitor Center - on 2 acres and was easily contained on Thursday as it was not in the Wilderness Area and we could plow around it.

**Gum Swamp** (1.4 acres) and **Buddy Fires** (12.2 acres) were both normally very swampy, wet hardwood habitats that rarely if ever see fire. Therefore, even with a line around them, they will continue to burn through the layers of duff, under trees and roots for along time. Many large hardwoods will be killed and the vegetation in those areas will be significantly altered. Even though St. Marks NWR has been prescribed burning since the 1930's, these hardwood habitats don't generally burn under prescribed burn conditions so there would be a much heavier rough than normal.

**The 118 Fire** on Rd. 118 was .2 acres and easily plowed around.

According to Mark Wool from the National Weather Service "This is the driest March 31 through May 31 we have had since 1835".

All of the fires that started on Wednesday May 23 are under control at time of print. As the summer rains slowly return, it will still take quite a while to reduce the wildfire potential.